

# On Questioning the President

By John Osborne

Readers say in letters that they are variously shocked, angered, horrified, insulted, devastated, dismayed and appalled by my confession in *The New Republic* of Sept. 9 that I stood within 10 feet of President Nixon at a press conference in California and didn't even try to ask him a simple and

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obvious question about the bugging of the Democratic Party's Washington headquarters. The complainants raise a subject that other people including Sen. McGovern, President Nixon and David Broder, a political reporter and columnist for *The Washington Post*, have also raised. The subject is the nature of the responsibility of reporters who specialize in the coverage of Richard Nixon now that he is both an incumbent President and a candidate for re-election.

Sen. McGovern says that reporters should be telling the country that the President hides from public debate, lies to handpicked crowds, and refuses to hold press conferences and answer questions that should be put to him and answered. Mr. Nixon says in effect that reporters should recognize the justice of his claim that at this state of the 1972 campaign his first responsibility is to do his job as President of the United States and accept without cavil his statement that "I shall campaign only when I conclude it will not interfere with doing the job the people elected me to do." David Broder, one of the best political reporters in the business, writes that "the Nixon entourage seems to be stifling the kind of dialogue that has in the past been thought to be the heart of a presidential campaign" and argues that "the press of the country ought to be calling Mr. Nixon on this — not for George McGovern's sake but for the sake of its own tattered reputation and for the public which it presumes to serve."

Herewith, in the faint hope that I won't seem to be unbearably defensive and pompous, I set forth my conception of the reporter's responsibility as it applies to me and describe my way of trying to meet it. My text is a portion of a letter from a reader in Freeport, N.Y. The reader didn't answer his telephone when he was called several times to ask permission to use his name and he therefore is quoted without further identification. He writes:

"I am in no position to look into President Nixon's eyes and ask him to explain the contradictory statements and conduct that flow from his administration of our government. But you are. I am in no position to question Vice President Agnew when he censures the patriotism of those who disagree with Mr. Nixon's handling of the Vietnam war. But you are. These men, and their peers, should be pushed up any available wall to defend openly and honestly their policies, foreign

and domestic. They should be asked and asked and asked by reporters such as yourself until some measure of truth begins to creep out. I am anxious to know why so many good reporters, who face President Nixon and his workers every day, are intimidated by the man and what he stands for. Is he so awesome that he is beyond question? Why were you, Mr. Osborne, afraid to ask that simple and obvious question of Mr. Nixon?"

WELL, HELL'S FIRE, I wasn't afraid to ask the question. Respect for the presidency and a sense of the futility of trying to make this President say anything he doesn't want to say do have the mesmerizing effect noted in my California report. But that is not intimidation. Asking public questions at public press conferences just isn't my way of reporting. I occasionally throw a question at the President's press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, at his regular White House briefings, and it may be said with confidence that Ziegler rarely enjoys the questions. I recall three occasions when I tried to catch the President's eye and be recognized for a question at some of the 28 press conferences he has held to date. Recognition isn't easy to get in that mob of reporters; I didn't try very hard; and I doubt that the President even knew I was trying.

I didn't try very hard for two reasons. They are that I prefer to do my serious questioning in private, with the various Nixon assistants who grant me audience now and then and that I hold public press conferences in very low esteem.

The reader whom I have quoted is the vic-

tim of a common illusion, which is cultivated by the press in general and by most of my colleagues. The illusion is that press conferences, especially when they are conducted by so skillful an operator as Mr. Nixon, are really useful instruments of public information. They seldom are. Mr. Nixon has said several times that he regards the press conference as merely one means of communication with the public and that he has a right to choose it or any of his other means—statements, speeches, etc.—for communication. I concede him that right and exercise my right to draw certain conclusions from the fact that he has chosen to hold fewer press conferences than any of his recent predecessors.

One of my conclusions, which will be considered heresy by most other reporters, is that the President does himself a disservice and does the country a service in holding so few press conferences. He would be worse off and the country would be better off if he didn't hold any press conferences. My reason for thinking this, already indicated, is that Mr. Nixon is altogether too good for the common good at using press conferences to present himself and his policies in a favorable light. He has been embarrassed at times by the sort of hard questions that he pretends to like and actually detests. He may have been driven to a few admissions of error that he didn't want to make. But I don't recall, and I don't find in a review of his conference transcripts, a single instance of a useful revelation that wasn't already available or didn't soon become available in other parts of the Nixon record. A demonstrable fact is that the hard questions do the President more good than harm when they are asked at televised press conferences. Broadcast reporters, who get much more mail than writing reporters do, are deluged with letters hostile to them and friendly to Mr. Nixon when they question him in a fashion that seems to many viewers to be disrespectful of the Presidency. The President's success in using press conferences for his own ends is one of the reasons, I am convinced, for his lead over Sen. McGovern in the national polls. This thought is commended to the senator, with the suggestion that he abandon his call upon Mr. Nixon to hold more press conferences. A suddenly called session in the President's office on Oct. 5, his second press conference since he was renominated, did him no harm and McGovern no good.

I SHOULD CONFESS at this point that my purpose in life is not to drive Mr. Nixon up the wall that my complaining readers want to see him pasted to. My purpose is to convey as clear a portrayal of him and his policies as I am capable of conveying. If the portrayal drives him up the wall, which I doubt, so be it. For me, there are two ways of accomplishing the purpose. Neither of them is pitching tough questions at the President in public. One way, the President being unavailable to the likes of me for private questioning, is to work hard at extracting whatever information and impressions I can from his phenomenally loyal and cautious assistants and from other officials. The other way is to search Mr. Nixon's considered statements, the kind he makes without reportorial prodding, for the substance of his policies and the volunteered reflection of his attitudes that they provide. I find in them very few of the lies that Sen. McGovern accuses him of telling. I do find in them many inconsistencies, evasions and exaggerations, some cause for sustained distrust, and a good deal that has to be admired.

One of the qualities to be found and documented in them is the President's talent for bland deception of his audiences. In Los Angeles on Sept. 27, at a fund-raiser that produced the record sum of \$1,755,000 for his campaign, the President said: "I was proud to be able to say, in addressing 124 nations at the International Monetary Fund meeting (in Washington) on Monday of this week, that the United States of America, at this time, had the lowest rate of inflation, the highest rate of growth, the highest real income of any industrial nation in the world." Mr. Nixon said nothing of the kind at the IMF meeting, where he knew his hearers knew the facts. What he said on that occasion was, "We are now experiencing one of the lowest rates of inflation, one of the highest rates of real economic growth, of any industrial nation." Compare the statements and think about them. That's what I try to do.

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